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Alert to Censorship

This week in Washington some of the cool heads of the newspaper industry will talk with President Kennedy about his recent suggestions for voluntary press censorship in the cold war.

The purpose is to make the President spell out what he has in mind so the newspaper industry can know where it stands and relay this information to its readers.

There is more to this meeting than meets the casual eye and ear, because Mr. Kennedy so far has confined his suggestions about voluntary censorship to newspapers and has not mentioned magazines, radio and television.

Obviously, every agency of communication would have to subscribe to a code of censorship, whether the agency happened to be a newspaper, or a television station. And because every agency of communication either is or claims to be protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, which forbids legislation concerning the press, the most voluntary kind of censorship imaginable would entail a surrender of the doctrine that freedom from government is the public's best guarantee of reliable information.

What always happens in these situations is that all agencies of communication are conceded to be free but some agencies end up by being freer than others — like the crack about all men being equal but some being more equal.

This is what the newspaper industry must be alert to, because it is the broadest target for political abuse.

Any hint from the White House of dissatisfaction with a code of news reporting that makes fair game of all secrets, even government secrets, rings an alarm. The direct provocation for President Kennedy's remarks, first made at the American Newspaper Publishers Association in New York May 27, was coverage given by elements of the press to preparations for invasion of Cuba.

This coverage tipped off readers to everything that was in the works, except the date of the invasion. It enabled Castro and his Russian sponsors to create an international opinion against the invaders. Whether it may have added to the failure of the invasion itself is uncertain.

But there couldn't be a better example of the futility of any kind of censorship. Relatively few Americans were made aware that their government through the Central Intelligence Agency was backing a Cuban invasion. Most of them were shocked when they heard about it for the first time after the invasion failed.

But everyone in Castro's government knew about it. The Kremlin knew about it. Peiping knew about it. Cubans knew about it.

This is the irony of voluntary censorship as tried in the United States, notably during World War II. Newspapers agree to keep sensitive information from the knowledge of their readers, but while they are doing this everybody and his brother and their sisters, cousins and aunts know about it anyway. And the enemy knows more about it than anyone else.